

Washington and the Way Station to Peace

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As the prospects for even limited bilateral Israeli-Palestinian agreements have receded, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has announced his intention to withdraw nearly all the Israeli settlements from the Gaza strip. It is a revolutionary move that creates the possibility of change at a time when Israeli-Palestinian relations are frozen in a pattern of terror, siege and hopelessness.

Efforts to fill the diplomatic vacuum created by the violence of the last three years, whether official like the "road map" to peace or unofficial like the Geneva Accords, have done little to transform the situation. Moreover, it is hard to find anyone at this point who believes that Yasser Arafat, who presently controls the Palestinian security organizations, is prepared to fulfill Palestinian security responsibilities.

In the meantime, the Palestinian reform movement that seemed so hopeful last spring withers under the weight of the Israeli siege and the chaos that Arafat cultivates. Pervasive Israeli control, the Israeli answer to the Palestinian Authority's unwillingness to do anything to stop acts of terror, produces deep anger among Palestinians and keeps the reformers on the defensive. Something has to change, and perhaps it can now that Mr. Sharon -- the architect of settlement construction over the last 25 years -- has declared his readiness to evacuate settlements.

But if the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and at least partial withdrawal to a new security line in the West Bank are to create a new opening, they must be done the right way. They must be done in a coordinated fashion. Israeli moves can be done unilaterally but not without an effort to shape Palestinian, Egyptian and European responses. They must be part of a strategic effort to create a new way station to eventual agreement, not a tactical response to pressures of the moment.

For the Palestinians, the Gaza withdrawal is a moment to demonstrate that Israeli withdrawals will lead to greater calm, not greater instability. It is a moment to prove to themselves and the world that if they obtain control from Israel, they can build and not just demolish. It is a moment for reformers to reassert themselves, rightfully claiming that

Palestinians cannot afford to miss another opportunity to advance the cause of statehood. Indeed, it can be their moment to prove that they can build a peaceful, democratic state -- one that can now be replicated in the West Bank. Some have argued that it is best for the international community to run Gaza after Israeli withdrawal. But if the Palestinians are absolved of responsibility of running their own affairs, the lessons of the past will never be learned. There will always be someone else to blame, someone else held accountable. Will Arafat seek to block the Palestinian Authority from confronting Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade after an Israeli withdrawal if it means that Palestinians demonstrate they are not ready for statehood? Perhaps. But it will be difficult for him to succeed in such circumstances. If nothing else, now is a time to be making clear to Palestinians what is at stake and what can be gained but also what is expected of them after withdrawal.

Palestinians may fear that Gaza First is Gaza Last, but the combination of having set the precedent of evacuating settlements and completing the security barrier in the West Bank will inevitably produce at least a partial pull-back there as well. The issue is not whether there will be a partial withdrawal in the West Bank. Rather, it is whether the security barrier, while not being a border, may remain the new separation line for a long time to come.

With most Palestinians in the West Bank living to the east of the barrier and with Israelis out of Gaza, a situation far more sustainable for Israel would be created. Whether that situation lasts a long time will be up to the Palestinians. If Israelis in both Gaza and the West Bank have gotten out of Palestinian lives -- thus creating a new climate -- and Palestinians assume their security responsibilities, peace making will be resumed and a permanent border can be negotiated relatively quickly. If the Palestinians are not prepared to assume their responsibilities, then the Palestinians may be looking at a reality that will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future with little prospect of Palestinian statehood any time soon.

Egypt should see that it too can help in this situation. An Israeli pull-out from Gaza creates an opportunity and a challenge for the Egyptians. They have a large stake in helping the Palestinians show the world they are ready for statehood, and bordering Gaza they are in a strong position to help. They can certainly do much more to prevent smuggling of potentially dangerous weaponry into Gaza, assist Palestinian security forces, and publicly declare that continued terror by Hamas and Islamic Jihad will threaten the Palestinian cause. No one is better positioned than President Mubarak to tell Arafat that he will be held accountable if he now tries to impede this opportunity.

For the Europeans, too, who have often been vocal critics of the Israelis, Israeli evacuation of settlements and withdrawal from Gaza can only be welcomed. They must not sit on the sidelines. In particular, the Europeans should join the U.S. and others in spearheading a broad construction effort with strict financial oversight. They should target assistance and investment to create a successful counterweight to Hamas's social welfare Dawa network. If there is a targeted infusion of funds and Palestinians see their lives improve, it is the people and not Hamas ideology that will gain.

Who can pull this coordinated effort together? Only the U.S. If Israeli withdrawal from Gaza is to create a way station to eventual peace, Washington must fashion a strategy of "coordinated unilateralism" and marshal support from an array of parties in the Middle East and beyond to make it happen. On their own, Israelis and Palestinians are unlikely to do this now. If the U.S. seizes the moment, however, it can help disentangle these peoples and give them a brighter future.

Mr. Ross, director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was special Middle East coordinator in the Clinton administration and director of the Policy Planning staff during the first Bush administration. David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. ❖

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